The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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OF RELIGION

No. 84 JUNE 4TH, 1941

DEAR MEMBER,

President Roosevelt's stirring speech was an emphatic assertion of America's resolve to defend her interests and liberties, and a renewed declaration of her faith in freedom and democracy. What is becoming increasingly clear, though still far from sufficiently understood on either side of the Atlantic, is that precisely this faith needs clearer and fuller definition. The material might of America added to that of Great Britain is not in itself sufficient to win the war. A more convincing picture of what the democracies will do with victory is essential to its achievement. It may be safely assumed that the overwhelming majority of people outside Germany, and some even in Germany itself, hate Nazism and would like the democracies to win. But there has been no convincing evidence that this country has any ideas beyond a restoration of pre-war conditions. The peoples on the continent know that that world has gone beyond recall. They do not as yet believe that Great Britain has any vital and creative ideas for establishing a new order. We are at present leaving the initiative to Germany not only in the military sphere, as for the present we must, but also in the field of ideas, where we need not. We are allowing the Nazis to create the impression that they at least know what they want and how they intend to achieve it. As the strain of war becomes more unbearable people will be tempted to say increasingly, ' Well, the Nazis at least set things moving and something may come of it all : Who knows? ' This opens up large questions which must be pursued later. But in the meantime there is one vital point at which, as the News-Letter has repeatedly insisted, we can distinguish our purposes from those of the Nazis.

AERIAL BOMBING

The Archbishop of Canterbury in addressing Convocation last week strongly emphasised the danger that just indignation might lose its moral strength by degenerating into mere vindictive passion. He urged that, adapting the phrase of Edmund Burke, we should "strive so to be patriots as not to forget that we are Christians," and expressed a strong hope that the Government, some of whose members have been using disquieting language, would resist any pressure to depart from what has been their declared policy.

The issue cannot be better put than in a letter by a serving airman which appeared some time ago in *The Times*: " We are fighting to preserve progress, civilization and the Christian ethic in Europe; and it seems to me unthinkable that we should allow the rulers of Germany, who care for none of these things, to induce us to ape the moral code of their Hun forefathers. There is, I think, no sense at all in living if we allow ourselves to sink to the standards of anti-Christ."

One of our members commenting on the Supplement by Dr. Niebuhr writes as follows: " To me, as a working minister with some opportunity of service among people directly suffering from the effects of war, there is a sense of distance and unreality in his explanation of the situation. The sorrowful thing I find is that in this struggle ' for truth and right ' these two great prizes of the soul are in danger of perishing while they are being fought for. I used to wonder how a Christian could be a Nazi. I made contact with a Nazi protestant pastor in order to find out. But I do not wonder any longer. A similar phenomenon is

apparent in Christian people here now. The willing credulity, which welcomes all evidence of German depravity, the intolerance of any attempt to hold back the ebbing tide of charity, the gradual hardening of the soul are to me a distressing sign of deterioration, not confined only to the laity. I could understand this in the non-Christian; but to find it in those whose God has the face of Jesus hurts badly. As in all wars, this spirit is more present in the civilian than in the soldier; and in those civilians who have not suffered, more than in those that have. Working in the night with people just brought in from their ruined homes I have found little of this; rather a sorrowful regret that this should be the lot of humble folk here and abroad."

NIGHT VIGIL

A letter expressing warm appreciation of the Supplement "Pater Noster," contains the following suggestion : " Many of us in these days have to spend at least some night hours during the week ' on duty ' as fire-watchers or in some other capacity; could we, who call ourselves Christians, train ourselves to use our enforced solitary vigils as an offering of intercession, a time when we really try to ' watch and pray.' I know that a night-watch is not always a time of waiting: sometimes there are urgent calls. But if those who believe in prayer could offer their vigil to God as intercession, it would surely be one more channel for the coming of His love and light and power into this distracted world. I don't mean that we should spend the whole time in prayer in the narrower sense of the term; I don't think I for one could manage that. But we might read something worthwhile, and think and try to get down to the quiet depths. We spend so much of our lives (necessarily) skittering about on the surface."

THE SUPPLEMENT

Dr. Nicolas Zernov, the writer of this week's Supplement, is a Russian who lived for five years in Yugoslavia and graduated from Belgrade University. Since coming to England in 1932 he has acted as secretary of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius. Those who are interested in the subject of his paper and wish to help can write to him at All Saints Vicarage, Hertford.

Yours sincerely,

J. H. Oldham

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GREAT BRITAIN AND THE BALKAN PEOPLES

By NICOLAS ZERNOV

After a heroic defence by Greece and a national uprising in Yugoslavia, which unfortunately came too late, the Balkan peoples have been subjected to the tyrannous rule and methodical exploitation of a powerful aggressor. From this yoke they will one day be freed and when that time comes very much will depend on the relations which are established between them and Great Britain. The purpose of this paper is to urge that Great Britain and the peoples of the Christian East have a real chance of establishing a solid friendship with each other. In spite of differences in national temperament and in geographical and historical conditions they share a religious outlook which has surprisingly many points in common, and this provides them with a solid foundation for mutual trust and understanding.

THE BALKAN NATIONS UNDER TRIAL

The Balkan people have in this country a reputation for two failings—their national rivalries and the party feuds among their politicians. These two causes have indeed contributed to the present downfall of these nations and opened wide the gates to the invaders. The conduct of some of the Balkan leaders, especially of those in Bulgaria who for the second time in the course of twenty-five years joined the side of the German aggression, and thus stabbed in the back the Serbs—their sister nation by blood and faith—deserves condemnation. Nevertheless, the general verdict on the moral strength of the Balkan peoples should not be unfavourable. Greece and Yugoslavia in the supreme hour of danger displayed exceptional heroism, readiness for sacrifice, and the high vision of honour. The fiery tests which they had to pass through showed them to be in no way inferior to the much more cultured, weathered and stabilised countries of Western Europe. For if the Balkan nations failed to assist each other, the same mistakes were committed in the West. If traitors were found among them, their presence was conspicuous also in other lands. Besides the Balkan peoples have suffered from a number of serious handicaps which were not of their own making but which had been to a considerable extent imposed upon them by the great Western powers. Great Britain is one of the countries which has constantly intervened in Balkan affairs, and she has therefore a large share of moral responsibility for some of the more flagrant failures of the Balkan peoples that enabled Germany to achieve her recent successes.

Most of the readers of this supplement will probably respond with surprise, and perhaps with indignation, to the suggestion that the British can be blamed for the existence of national rivalries and political intrigues among the Balkan people. But a survey of the history of the last 100 years would show that Great Britain played several times a decisive rôle in their history and was on many occasions actively opposed to their consolidation. Time is now too precious to waste on recrimination or on regrets for past mistakes, but in order to avoid their repetition, we need to analyse the causes which led Great Britain on several occasions into hostility towards the Balkan Christians.

EASTERN CHRISTIANS AND THE WESTERN POWERS

Prominent among these was the Eastern tradition of their Church which made the Balkan nations seem to belong to another world, quite distinct from that of Western Europe. Since the time of the crusades deep-rooted hostility has marred the relations between Eastern and Western Christians. These prejudices derived from the remote and almost forgotten past have a far greater influence upon modern international relations than most people are prepared to recognise. They seriously hindered the growth of friendship between Great Britain

and the Balkan Christians in the last century and they may affect unfavourably their co-operation in the future. It is therefore very important to realise their existence and to try to remove them. The Balkan people, broken into various nationalities, speaking many different languages, have yet one solid common bond. The bulk of them are members of the Eastern Orthodox Church. Her interpretation of Christianity, distinct both from the Roman and Reformed confessions of the West, has profoundly influenced their history and outlook.

The Orthodox Church saved them from distintegration during the 600 years which they spent under the Mohammedan yoke, and gave them courage and strength to regain their independence. The process of political liberation was slow and painful. Greece was the first country to achieve her freedom (1821). Her example was followed by Serbia and Rumania. Bulgaria (1878) and Albania (1912) were the last. National rivalry, the lack of experienced leaders, but above all constant intervention by the great European powers, made the task of rebuilding their national life most difficult.

In the second part of the nineteenth century, the most decisive period in the history of the Balkan Christians, the chief opponents to their freedom and unity were Great Britain and Austria. The Austrians who had vast territorial ambitions in the Balkans naturally did all they could to keep them in a state of permanent division. The British diplomats pursued the same policy for another reason. They considered that the interests of the British Empire demanded that the Dardanelles should be kept in the hands of the Turks and, therefore, they opposed the consolidation of the Balkan Christians. Exaggerated fears of Russia coupled with lack of understanding of the psychology of the Balkan Christians pushed Great Britain into the camp of their enemies and made her support Germanic plans to keep the Christians there in a permanent state of impotence and frustration. They also led her to accept too readily the belief that the Balkan Christians were corrupt, superstitious and reactionary. This belief was used to justify the policy of a great Christian nation in trying to create further dissensions among other Christians and in perpetuating their oppression by the Mohammedans.

THE COMMON BACKGROUND

Hardly anybody in Britain realised at that time that these despised Balkan Christians, especially the Greeks and the Serbs, were champions of the same freedom and were inspired by the same ideal of Christian democracy which has always been associated with the political life of the British people. The similarity of the aspirations of the Balkan people and of Britain is the result of a spiritual affinity which exists between the Christian traditions of this country and the teaching and practice of the Eastern Orthodox Church. But the national leaders both in Britain and the Balkans were unaware of this fact and ignorance of it prevented them from establishing any close understanding.

CULTURAL COLLABORATION

The same cause contributed to the second fatal mistake, the failure of Great Britain to assist the Balkan nations in the formation of their new ruling classes. At the time of their liberation in the nineteenth century the Balkan Christians had not educated people in the Western sense of the word. They needed doctors, lawyers, engineers and teachers, and young men from very rustic, but deeply Christian, homes were sent straight to the great centres of Western Europe to get the necessary qualifications. The majority of them returned to their countries deeply affected by the materialism and secularism of Western civilisation, and convinced that the sign of an educated man was his emancipation from Christianity and its moral code.

The result was that the leading men in the Balkans lost touch with the bulk of their people, who remained faithful to the Church, and many of them fell victims to that self-seeking opportunism which is the curse of Balkan politics. In this most vital sphere of their national life Great Britain could have helped the Balkan peoples, but she made little attempt to come to their assistance. She possessed the political experience and cultural maturity which they lacked and so much needed. Her Christian tradition was the nearest to theirs and only in this country would their young men have been able to learn the most important lesson that a modern educated man can remain a convinced Churchman. The course of events after the last war was particularly disappointing.

There was a great national awakening in all these countries and the young generation of the educated classes began to be tired of the materialism and cynicism of their fathers and in increasing numbers turned their attention to Christianity. They started to take an interest in their Church and to recognise that she was the true source of their national culture. The prestige of Great Britain stood very high in those years, and the young people from the Balkans were ready to undergo every privation in order to come and study in England. But again this country did not realise the importance of this movement of cultural rapprochement. No adequate provisions were made to facilitate their coming.[1] In the last eight years it was chiefly Germany which provided a large number of scholarships for Balkans students.

It was of course not lack of resources that prevented Great Britain in the twentieth century from establishing cultural collaboration with the people of that vital part of the world. It was partly the persistence of the same religious suspicions and prejudices which made this country the enemy of the consolidation of the Balkan Christians in the nineteenth century and partly short-sighted and irresponsible indifference to the spiritual state of other nations which characterised the policy of the Western democracies during the last twenty years.

The lessons of this war clearly show the mistakes of such an attitude. They reveal a profound interdependence of all the nations, and throw a new light upon the importance of a solid spiritual foundation for the establishment of their mutual trust and collaboration. Seen from this angle the relations between Great Britain and the Balkan Christians acquire a special significance. Both sides need the help of each other, their co-operation can greatly contribute towards the stabilisation of Europe and they possess in the similarity of their religious outlooks a common link of a first-class significance. This means that they have a far greater facility for co-ordination of their actions in politics and in cultural and economic spheres than those nations whose philosophy of life has few points in common. The disregard of these underlying spiritual factors greatly contributed to the present chaos and disintegration of international order and a realistic tackling of them is of supreme importance. The first task confronting therefore both the Balkan and the British people is to realise that they are not spiritual strangers but on the contrary natural allies who share the same ideals and aim at a similar goal.

[1] A college for Serbian Theological Students opened in Oxford during the last war was closed down and no further facilities for the training of Balkan students in this country were offered till The British Council took an interest in them, but its work was started only on the eve of the present war.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Little can be done at the moment in the Balkans while the people there are crushed under the heel of the invader. But it is vital to begin at once to plan for the future. The experience of the last decades has convincingly demonstrated that friendships forged on the battlefield do not last long unless they are followed up by the policy of cultural co-operation and mutual assistance.

The cultural treaty concluded last winter between Great Britain and Greece was the first official recognition of this fact. The success of this agreement will depend however on the basis on which it is eventually built up. There is a great danger for a stronger partner to use such a treaty as a mere instrument for extending its political influence and this policy inevitably leads to resentment in the other party. In order to avoid this danger a wise and full use of spiritual factors has to be made, for, although the European nations differ greatly in their size and military strength they all have their cultural originality and here they can bring forth their contributions. This is a sphere of international relations where they can treat each other as equals and establish a real co-operation among themselves.

This is also a sphere where the influence of religion is particularly felt and it applies especially to the Balkans, where the majority of people still remain active members of their Churches. The growth of mutual understanding and co-operation between the British Commonwealth and them is conditioned, therefore, to a large extent by the relations of the Eastern Churches with the Anglican and Free Church communities of this country. They have been increasingly more friendly during the last twenty years. Official visits of the leaders, contacts made at various theological conferences helped

to remove many prejudices and to establish a better understanding among some of their representatives. But this new spirit has hardly touched the main bulk of their members who still remain completely unaware of the amount of unity existing between the Eastern Orthodoxy and the main stream of Christian tradition in Great Britain.

The task of propagating the idea of Unity fell upon the unofficial societies working for the better understanding between the Eastern and Western Christians. Especially interesting are the lessons derived from the experience of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius, started in 1929. Its methods were new, for they were based on worship as a chief means of explaining the differences between the Eastern and Western interpretation of Christianity. A young generation of Church people, especially the students, were brought into this work and a complete equality between the two traditions was established. The Fellowship is not an Anglican society for the promotion of better relations with the Christians of the East, but it is a body where both Eastern and Western Christians work together for this unity. The exchange of students was one of the activities of this Fellowship and the results achieved were most encouraging. Young people from the Balkans and from among the Russians in exile were brought to stay and to study in this country, and whenever they met the Christian side of the British life they felt at once at home in the otherwise very foreign atmosphere of Great Britain. Their suspicions were dispelled and firm friendships with people here were established. The same was experienced by those English students who during their vists to the Balkans had an opportunity of meeting Church people there.

This is an important proof that Great Britain and the Balkan peoples can understand, trust and collaborate with each other, but this is possible only if they realize where lies the source of their unity. In order to make this clear to both parties a systematic campaign of instruction must be launched. Suitable literature has to be produced, a regular exchange of students and professors organised and, above all, a centre for the training of the leaders of this movement for religious and cultural rapprochement has to be established. Naturally these tasks are above the possibilities of small and informal bodies which so far have been working in this field, but these pioneer societies have discovered the right methods and thus prepared the way for action on a larger scale. It is now time for the Churches to take up this new job and to start training men and women as missionaries of Christian fellowship and international understanding. Many disasters of this war could be avoided if it was started in good time, but nothing is really lost if we are still able to learn by the mistakes of the past and are prepared to forge up-to-date weapons in order to meet better the challenge of the future.

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